

# How the Nuns Won a Victory

By EDWARD W. THOMSON

The following tale is not fiction, but fact, except inasmuch as the hero here bears a name not his own, lest he be chaffed—he who subsequently won the Distinguished Service Order and the Croix de guerre in Flanders and France.—E. W. T.

IN 1912 Harry Graves was in his second year at Harvard, whither his Canadian parents, resident in Vancouver, B. C., had sent him, for family reasons which need not be here specified. Because he must see his mother at Christmas, he took section 6, of the C. P. R. sleeping car "Strathcona," at Boston. I had lower 5, across the aisle from him. We made acquaintance at breakfast, shortly before reaching Montreal.

There two rather elderly nuns of a teaching Order took section 3, just in front of me, across the aisle from Harry, and one section nearer the front than his. Young Graves, being a High Church Anglican, and particularly revering the Sisterhood of Saint Anne, held all nuns in delicate respect, as do kindly Protestants in general. Hence he was a little embarrassed by the location of the two nuns, inasmuch as he could not turn eyes to the right without seeming to scan the Sister who sat with her back to the front of the car.

This lady, at the white-jacket's "first call to lunch," lifted a wicker hamper to a place beside her, and opened it. Harry went forward to the dining car, though he had not meant to take lunch before the last call. It was clear to me, from the nuns' looks and nods at each other, that they appreciatively understood that the young man had wished to free them from a sense of being overlooked by him at their meal.

Their hamper was closed when Harry came back from having lunched very well. He was abundantly supplied with money, and fond of good eating. His father, later, told me that he surmised—from Harry's appetite and generosity and sympathetic nature—"that the boy might turn out to be an epicure, a spendthrift, or a saint, or all three at once."

"I had a tip-top lunch," Harry told me in the smoking room. "Why in thunder couldn't those two nuns go forward and get something hot? They seem to have only bread and apples! But perhaps their convent is in Ottawa; so they will get off there, and have a square meal soon."

Though the idea of their cold food so troubled him, I did not tell him what mine eyes had chanced to see of their hamper's contents. It was none of my business, and I was curious about what he would do if the nuns stayed long aboard.

They did not get off at Ottawa. Past Carleton, Arnprior, twenty other stations, we sped all that December afternoon. At 5:30 p.m., as if startled to obedience by "first call to dinner" they began again to open their hamper. Harry instantly went back to the smoking compartment, meaning not to dine before the "last call," at 7 p.m. Returning to his own section about 6:45, his inevitable glance at the hamper, which had somehow not been closed, again showed him naught but bread and apples.

GRIEF for the nuns had not lessened Harry's dinner. On the contrary he had done himself uncommonly well, he said, and he complimented the C. P. R. cooking. But a fresh solicitude about those *religieuses* was now troubling his sympathetic soul. They had but one section! One of them must climb to the upper berth. Now he had a whole section, taken because he wished the "upper" to stay up, and so give him plenty of head-room and ventilation. Couldn't he take a section in a forward car, and offer his number 6 to those good nuns? Then they could each have a section, with the "uppers" up. If he had not feared to offend or startle them he would, I am sure, have offered them his section. When, later, it became clear that they were to sleep side by side, in their "lower," and leave up their "upper," Harry was but little relieved.

Next morning, before North Bay was reached, Harry, breakfasting at the same table with me, immediately after the first call, beckoned the conductor or superintendent of the diner to him.

"I want you to do something special for me," said Harry, handing the man a two dollar tip.

"Certainly, Sir. Most 'appy to oblige you, Sir," said the Old-Englander.

"Very well. There are two nuns on the Strathcona. I want you to invite them to come in here for their meals."

"Very well, Sir. Thank you, Sir. You can trust me to speak most respectfully."

"All right. Now, don't take a bill of fare to them. The prices might scare them. Inquire what they would like. Mention the best things you have, the kind you know ladies usually like best. If they seem puzzled just ask them to please leave it to you, and you will take care they have a nice, hot breakfast. Tell them you will send it to them by a waiter if they would prefer not coming back to the diner."

"Very well, Sir. I understand puffedly. But wot if they don't understand English?"

"They do," I put in. "I overheard one of them explain to the porter last night, in English, how they wished their berth to be made up."

"Then it will be all right, Sir. Thank you, Sir. I will go right in and speak to those ladies most respectfully."

Soon the superintendent came back with, "Them ladies accepted most grateful, Sir. They told me they'd leave the breakfast to me. I hordered a tip-topper. They'll be right in. Three tables behind you, Sir. Tea was their honly real horder, tea 'ot and strong. Oh, here they come now, Sir."

"Go away-sh-sh. They will suspect me," said Harry. "Never, Sir. I told 'em it was a very old gentleman as asked 'em."

"You did! Confound you!" There Harry looked at my grey hairs, and said considerably, "There is not one old gentleman on this train, I think."

"Lor' bless you, Sir, that's just why I told 'em he was very old. They won't be going through the train, like you did, Sir, to see who is aboard." "Go 'way. You have muffed it, I'm afraid." But Harry called him back next moment. "Yes, you may bring me marmalade," he said loudly, turning round to call this out. His deep, deep game was evidently to make the nuns

suppose he had previously rejected offered marmalade. But, as he turned, he saw the elder nun gazing at him so approvingly that he blushed with confusion. "My lip-reading power made me sure that the elder nun had said to her sister, 'Yes, it is that young man. What a good heart!'"

As Harry deliberately prolonged his breakfasting, a new fear assailed him; "What if that fool Englishman brings me their bill while they're watching?" But the "supe" was not so stupid as all that.

When the nuns soon vanished forward he sent the bill to Harry by a waiter; \$4.45. "Them ladies did themselves well, Sir," remarked the waiter.

"No impertinence about those ladies," said Harry sharply.

"I beg your pardon, Sir. I wasn't meanin' hany impertinence."

"Very well. Now attend to what I say. Those ladies are not to know who pays this small bill. If they are told, no more tips from me. You will keep that same table for them at every meal." He tipped the waiter a dollar.

"Thank you Sir. Will they be going right through to the coast, Sir?"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. Keep their table as long as they stay aboard." Harry departed.

"Ascentric young bird," said the waiter to the "supe," as I saw rather than heard.

Harry, wending to the Strathcona after me, said—"Suppose they do suspect me."

"Keep cool as a cucumber," I advised. "They'll be watching for a sign, reading your face. Take care you don't catch their eye."

But the more elderly nun rose as we came in, spoke to her sister, and advanced toward Harry, who blushed furiously.

"Will Monsieur please sit with us for one leetle meenit?" said she. "You are so ver' good, Monsieur. We must thank you for so nice, hot breakfas', one tusan' tahn."

"Didn't the man tell you it was a very old gentleman?" asked confused Harry.

"But we feel sure he tol' wat was not. We feel sure you was de gentleman w'at sen' us so kind invitation you'sef."

"It was most kind of you to give me the honor," said Harry, owning up.

"We could not but—when you send so kind respect for our Sisterhood. Also, we are ver' glad now we did not refuse. Such good breakfas', Monsieur! Such ver' good, hot tea. Merci, Monsieur, for all your goodness."

Then the less elderly nun spoke in a singularly clear, sweet English voice—"Let us assure you of one thing, Sir. We do not dislike to receive such kindness. On the contrary we love to accept it from the charitable. All the income of our Order is what the charitable bestow. We reason this way—all our Work is for the Lord—when He provides for our needs we feel that He is blessing our Work. You were this morning His chosen instrument."

"I!" exclaimed startled Harry.

"But certainly, Monsieur," said the French-Canadian Sister. "How could that not be? Every one giving charity is de instrument of our Blessed Savior."

"Who sent us a most excellent breakfast, with delicious tea," said the English nun, in a cosy, matter-of-fact tone.

"Well, I am very glad I was chosen," said Harry. "And I do hope the Lord will keep on using me as His instrument. May I ask how far you two ladies are traveling?"

"But certainly, Monsieur. We go on this car to Regina, two days more. Then we go on one other car to Sainte Philomene, one day more. There we teach de little Metis (halfbreeds). That is at our Meesion on de Saskatchewan riviere du nord. Me, I have teach five year dere—my sister nevaire. Me, I was go to Montreal by order, for tol' w'at is need for Sainte Philomene Meesion. My Eenglish sister is volunteer for come back wis me for teach."

"Three days more traveling! You will be dreadfully tired," said he.

"But no, Monsieur! This ees rest, eet ees luxury, we are ashame for tink w'at eet cost our Mother Superior for pay for de teekets. But no oder way was. We could no walk so far. Also we mus' have sleep on so long travel. So it is not wrong eef you con-seeder de whole."

"But you will be worn out if you have not proper food. You won't be able to teach those poor little Metis unless you take three comfortable meals a day. That is why I beg you to do me the honor of being my guests at every meal in the dining car until you get off at Regina."

Both nuns threw up their hands as in dismay. The elder remonstrated. "But, Oh Monsieur, de expense! Terreeble! I must tell you all. Before we go in we order our breakfas'. We do not understand de cost before we read de carte. O terreeble! If we was see de carte firs—nevaire, Monsieur! We could leev wan week on what you was pay."

"My father gives me more money than I need," he said. "Now you ladies must help me to go on being the Lord's instrument. Please. I wish to arrange it so that you can go to the diner whenever you choose. I beg you to be so good to me as to accept this." He handed the elder nun some folded bank bills.

She did not affect to refuse. The other Sister spoke, Oh so clearly:—"Sir, we take your generous gift with gratitude. Your charity is a sign of a Work of Grace in your heart. Our Blessed Savior is with you this moment."

A little shiver went through Harry at her solemn tone. Yet he felt ashamed to be so moved. Hastily he rose with, "The money is nothing, just nothing at all. Please take it as from my father," and he awkwardly left them. The nuns unfolded three ten dollar bills. Enormous sum! They raised to heaven hands and eyes. Then they fell to confabulation excited, often renewed, of which Harry Graves saw or heard naught. He had gone to the smoking room.

To luncheon in the diner no nuns came. Harry did not pry into the why. But he speculated—had they reverted to their hamper? Bread and apples! Surely they would take a hot dinner. But no, they did not appear in the diner for dinner. He had kept out of their way since morning. He now began to feel disappointed, cross, almost cheated.

The diner superintendent told him—"Them blessed nuns has had nothing all day, Sir, from me, excep'in, hot tea. Shall I keep on savin' that table for 'em?"

"I will tell you at breakfast," said Harry, and went to his own section of the Strathcona.

AGAIN the nuns rose to greet him. Again he sat beside the more elderly Sister, "Monsieur, we have to thank you for delicious tea twice since breakfas'."

"But you did not get even one comfortable meal, ladies."

"Oh Monsieur, you know not what is in our basket. So comfortable foods!" She lifted the hamper and opened it. "Behold, Monsieur! Cheecken, ham, biscuit, bread, cake, jam, marmalade, apples, everything—all ver' good—an' de porter was breeng hot tea when we ask heem. For de tea we pay wis your beeg money. Was not all lak w'at you weesh, Monsieur? for us for have w'atever we weesh for have—w'at we like bes." She made persuasive eyes at Harry, even as a secular old lady might have done.

"Oh certainly," said Harry. "But I did hope you would like hot meals better than cold ones."

"Sir," spoke the exquisite voice of the English Sister, "we know well what kind thoughts were in your heart. But consider. How wrong to waste food, with so many hungry in the world. And we really have excellent things in our basket. Our Mother Superior told us we had received almost too many good things, and we must take care lest we become luxurious. Yet she gave us two dollars for hot tea on the way! So we made the good resolution to abstain from tea, and save that money for the little children. That was to be our small disciplinary offering to Our Lord and Savior. Behold how He blessed the good intention, by moving your generous heart to give us so great a sum of money. Never have we seen so much at one time since taking our vows. That money we would save for the poor, little ones—we hope with your approval. My sister here tells me there is seldom, at the Mission House, enough food, or medicine or books for all the children to learn their lessons at once. How greatly will your generosity help there! We are also vowed against luxury in our Sisterhood. Yet we wish to keep faith with you. We hope you will be glad at our saving your large gift for the children, except what we have wasted, twice, on tea today, a luxury sinful in the circumstances. Sympathize with us for the children—that will be as a feeling of God's blessing in your own heart."

The gentle, pleading old voice bore into Harry's soul some sweet happiness he had never before known. Unable to reply, he rose with a lump in his throat, and left the nuns, whose eyes I saw closed long as in adoration of Grace made manifest.

Yet was Harry obstinate. He tried to circumvent them next morning by sending in to their section an excellent breakfast, which they caused the waiter to carry instantly to a weary mother and her children in the Colonist car, explaining later to Harry that they had now vowed to eat from their hamper until their journey's end. No need to relate here all they went on to tell him of the needs at Sainte Philomene Mission.

The consequence being that Harry Graves, after two days' pondering, gave them all the cash he could possibly spare, just before reaching Regina.

"The train waits here twenty minutes," said the English Sister, as he helped them off the Strathcona, I following close behind. "Come with us a little aside from the people."

The weather was thirty degrees below zero. Never before had Harry seen so great a heavenly host of dilating stars, with vast, shifting boreal splendors in north and west and east. The English nun gazed at that strange glory with wondering adoration.

"Young Sir," I could hear her angelic voice faintly, "We are sure you have given us nearly all your money. Do not protest. It is for the little children, whom our Savior loves most dearly. In giving unto them you have known the sweetest blessing that life bestows, grace from our Lord moving in your heart. We separate here, probably never to meet again in this world. And I repeat what you shall never, never forget—that you have been moved by special grace from our Lord and Savior in your goodness to us."

Two pairs of old, blessing eyes shone wondrously in Harry's dreams that night; so his dear mother confided to me in Vancouver some days later, tenderly boasting of her gentle-hearted boy.

Yes, and in Flanders Fields Major Graves, many a dreadful night, visioned his mother, and the Regina stars, and the old nuns, whom he never saw again. In dreams he often heard the holy voice blessing him again, despite all war's woes, and alarms, and cannonades; so he told me, soon after he came home strong, well, unhurt. And he verily believes that the nuns' prayers helped to save him harmless! So touchingly credulous did some soldiers become.